October 13, 1975

Mr. Harry Schwartz
New York Times
229 W 43rd Street
New York, New York 10036

Dear Harry,

I was sorry to see the editorial "Genetic Quandry" that appeared in the New York Times for October 6th. That is to say, it seemed to be missing a final paragraph.

It is indeed true that one side-effect of improved scientific understanding of genetic disease is to stay the hand of natural selection in restraining or reducing the prevalence of deleterious mutations. It should also be noted, however, that this is the least important of our medical problems from a social context since the rate of increase of genetic disease can be demonstrated to be extremely low by comparison with either the rate of medical advance in dealing with it, or the new disease influences that result from changes in environment and in life-style. Furthermore, the same genetic science that enables victims of genetic misfortunate to survive and perhaps to propagate some of these genes also gives them the knowledge to use their own judgement and wisdom in deciding about whether to have such children at risk. This science has also furnished and hopefully will continue to be even more effective in the future, many new tools for the recognition of potential disease carrier states, even to the point in some circumatances of identifying fetuses who would have very dismal prospects for human life and enabling a humane choice with respect to their aboraion. In any case, these problems have a very small relative social impact compared to their significance for the individual families in which they occur. Rather than look with alarm to the social impact, I would rather encourage the dissemination of more wise counseling about genetic disease to enable individual families to make the soundest judgments in their own interest.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics

JL/rr